

## **Establishing Learning Sites to Raise Up Resource Persons**

Enlisting the aid of resource persons for expansion and consolidation has proven to be an effective strategy in giving an impetus to the teaching work in a wide range of clusters. The success of this approach has been borne out by the growing wave of enrollments in clusters where resource persons have been utilized. The fact that Bahá'í teachers from outside one's area can have a catalytic and galvanizing impact on the teaching efforts of the local friends is not new. We are all familiar with Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "the movement itself from place to place, when undertaken for the sake of God, hath always exerted ... its influence." And we may have personally experienced the truth of this assertion. Recently, however, we have started to learn how to marshal and deploy capable Bahá'í teachers "across borders" in such a way as to significantly intensify the cycle of teaching activity in clusters and create the dynamics for increased, sustained growth.

Having recognized the potential of this strategy, the question became how to quickly raise up greater numbers of such resource persons on all continents and assure accelerated progress toward fulfilling the global goal of 1,500 intensive programs of growth. The answer, as is so often the case, is to spread the learning.

The mode of implementation that has proven successful is to bring potential resource persons—individuals fully engaged in the framework of the Five Year Plan, who have the necessary skills and qualities for empowering others in the expansion and consolidation work—to an advanced cluster during its expansion phase and orient them to this specialized role. These clusters have become valuable sites for resource persons to learn how they can function when they visit a cluster to assist with the implementation of a direct teaching project and subsequent consolidation. Through training that combines a study of relevant guidance with corresponding practice in the host cluster, participants gain a sense of the relationship between learning and action.

Such learning sites are emerging in increasing numbers on all five continents from Los Angeles to Lubumbashi. This edition of the newsletter highlights the experience of a few key clusters where the learning generated is radiating out to more and more clusters and encompassing a growing cadre of resource persons who are ready to fan the embers of teaching into a blaze of wide-scale growth.

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### **Colombia**

One of the first clusters chosen to serve as a site for learning was also the home of the Ruhi Institute, the **Norte del Cauca** cluster. Individuals from other clusters in Colombia and from Central America were selected to spend time in this model cluster not only to observe its activities but also to actively participate in them. Once trained in Colombia, these teachers were then to be dispatched to other clusters to assist with the expansion work.

Most of those who attended the training were expected to participate for three weeks—two weeks devoted to the reflection meeting, planning, and the expansion phase, and the first week of the consolidation phase. The workshops for the participants combined deepening on quotations from the Writings and guidance from the Bahá'í World Centre with a review of the current state of the Five Year Plan. Those from outside the host cluster also shared what was happening in their own areas, both achievements and challenges. They were taught to assess the strength of a cluster by undertaking a thorough analysis of the data for Norte del Cauca. They were also offered both instruction and practice in the direct teaching methods promoted in Ruhi Institute Book 6. Participants visited institute activities accompanied by the institute coordinator and participated in meetings of the cluster agencies and the cluster reflection gathering. They actively engaged in the expansion phase and were involved in the planning and implementation of the consolidation work.

Positive results from the Colombian training seminar were immediate. For example, one of the participants from Costa Rica was dispatched to the **Aguascalientes** cluster in Mexico. His assistance to the friends there resulted in 38 declarations. This same resource person then helped to plan a pilot teaching project in the **Greater Metropolitan** cluster of Costa Rica, which brought in 10 new believers in five days. A Counsellor observed that the first two believers to return to her area from the training in Colombia had acquired “a whole new ‘mode’ of service and pace of activity.”

The lessons learned in Norte del Cauca were also transferred to other areas by resource persons from Colombia who were sent to assist in other countries. For example, an Auxiliary Board member from Colombia has energized the friends in Peru and Ecuador. Another served as a resource person in Bolivia. He trained cluster agency members and other key individuals from all over the country during the expansion phase in the **Cochabamba** cluster. After the orientation and hands-on experience in Norte del Cauca, the resource persons helped generate a wave of over 1,000 new believers across several clusters in the region.

### **Democratic Republic of the Congo**

A similar approach was followed in Africa with similarly impressive results. The **Lubumbashi** cluster was chosen to be the learning site for the central region of the continent because it was already a strong cluster and had recently had an acceleration in teaching, growing from an average of 42 new believers in the 9<sup>th</sup> cycle to 63 in the 10<sup>th</sup> cycle.

The first three-week training session was held in November during Lubumbashi's 11<sup>th</sup> cycle. It was a pilot project that gathered 27 participants from 18 different clusters in nine provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The spiritual atmosphere of the large and vibrant reflection meeting in which the invited friends participated was enhanced by the performances of four choirs from different parts of the cluster and the recitation of poems and quotations by gifted pre-youth. The teaching goal was then raised from 100 to 150, and the financial goal to \$2,650. Both were surpassed. One of the reports states, “The friends were beside themselves with enthusiasm and excitement.”

As over 160 new believers entered the Faith in the first week, the expansion phase was brought to a close. Consolidation was systematic and swiftly accomplished. A list of those who should continue to be visited was drawn up, as well as one of the new believers and the types of activities they should now be offered. A large meeting was called so that each friend present could volunteer for one or two core activities to help provide for the integration of the large number of new believers. Five new children's classes were established, as was a new

group for junior youth. Plans were made to make 190 home visits to new believers and friends of the Faith, and five new study circles were initiated. Because of further contacts made during the consolidation phase, the number of new believers rose to 211.

The participants from other clusters at the Lubumbashi learning site were deeply impressed with what they witnessed, especially the systematic planning by the cluster agencies, the efficacy of “Anna’s presentation,” and above all the spirit that permeated the Lubumbashi cluster. One commented that “all the teachers were animated by a spirit of service and humility, blessed by divine assistance, all of which gave this phase an indescribable ambience.”

Once the friends returned to their own clusters, the learning from the 11<sup>th</sup> cycle of the Lubumbashi cluster quickly spread to other parts of the country. For example, in the **Nur** cluster (Kinshasa) there were 37 enrollments during the first week of its next teaching campaign whereas previous cycles had averaged 10. A cluster just reaching the goal of launching an intensive program of growth, **Badi**, had 15 declarations in less than three days. The **Kamal** cluster registered 23 declarations in two days. More recently, the **Bandundu** cluster has reported 15 declarations, and the **Salman** cluster 34. One of the Counsellors serving the Democratic Republic of the Congo wrote after receiving many telephone calls reporting victories, “These days, I always go to sleep very happy.”

Building upon their experience as a learning site during the 11<sup>th</sup> cycle, the friends in Lubumbashi hosted a second training session during their 12<sup>th</sup> cycle in February 2008, this time attended by 17 participants from Rwanda, Burundi, and again different parts of the Congo. Within the first five days of the expansion phase, 143 souls in one neighborhood embraced the Faith. Although the believers tried to curb the teaching activities, others continued to declare their faith, so that the number of new declarations rose to 252. The 17 participants from outside were immediately put to work to assist in the herculean efforts needed to plan and implement for the consolidation of the now more than 500 friends who had entered the Faith in recent months. In addition to the consolidation activities mentioned earlier, about 50 more pre-youth were placed in pre-youth groups, and 150 new children in children’s classes.

Clearly, the friends attending the training in Lubumbashi’s learning site had taken part in a thrilling crash course—not only in expansion and consolidation activities but also in the careful planning and warm collaboration of the cluster agencies and institutions necessary for success.

### **Kyrgyzstan**

Following on the experience and success of the orientation for resource persons in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in November 2007, a similar seminar for potential resource persons from Russia, central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe was held in **Bishkek**, Kyrgyzstan, in February 2008. More than 120 believers from 10 countries participated in the seminar. At the conclusion of the program, the newly trained resource persons were deployed not only in central Asia but also in Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine, and European Russia.

Each day the participants studied recent guidance from the World Centre about the process of growth and shared successes and challenges from teaching experiences in their own clusters. In this context, they particularly benefited from the learning acquired by those friends who had already served as resource persons—learning which encompassed the practical details and the planning involved in orchestrating an intense period of expansion and the ensuing consolidation phase. During the seminar the participants also spent time preparing guidelines

for teaching campaigns and, in particular, for the consolidation efforts that must follow—an exercise that focused their thinking and prompted them to consult and draw upon their previous experiences in the field.

One feature of the program which proved extremely useful in enhancing the participants' capacity for teaching and accompanying others in this sacred act was a detailed analysis of the content and structure of "Anna's presentation." Going well beyond its memorization, the friends were able to identify the concepts and principles involved in offering this clear and compelling presentation of the Faith and to reflect on the powerful spiritual dynamics involved in inviting a soul to embrace the Cause of God.

Thirty of the seminar participants remained in Bishkek for a few extra days to assist the community with the teaching campaign that was launched immediately following the seminar, and 10 stayed for the full week of the expansion phase. The teaching activity was carried out in the neighborhood where the training had been held and where the headquarters of the teaching project was located. Within the first two days, the goal of enrolling 50 adult believers was met, so the next five days were dedicated to consolidation. Without delay, 21 new believers and seekers were integrated into study circles. The neighborhood in which the teaching so successfully took place had never been considered a particularly receptive area. Yet more than 90 people expressed an interest in participating in the institute courses.

### **United States**

When teaching the Cause, a teacher often learns as much as the one taught. So it is also true with communities that serve as sites for the dissemination of learning; the friends there benefit as much as, if not more than, those who come to learn from them. This has already proven true for the learning sites in the United States, of which there are four thus far: **Dallas**, Texas; **East Valley**, Arizona; **Los Angeles**, California; and **Metro Atlanta**, Georgia. The process of training and utilizing resource persons to lead direct teaching campaigns has resulted in a new spirit of teaching and a significant breakthrough in growth in the country. The repercussions of these achievements are rippling across the United States and beyond, and lessons learned are already being applied in cluster after cluster.

The recent seminar held in the **Dallas** cluster on "Renewing the Spirit of Teaching" demonstrates the benefits of international collaboration in establishing sites for learning and for raising up resource persons for expansion and consolidation. This effort in the United States received a great boost in late March when two Counsellors from Latin America and a resource person from Colombia, along with an American Counsellor, led a four-day orientation for 25 participants, which included 17 Auxiliary Board members as well as members of institutions and cluster agencies from other parts of the country. Three clusters in the Dallas area were "hosts" for the actual teaching activities: **Dallas City**, **Dallas Northeast**, and **Tarrant County**. The Local Spiritual Assembly of Dallas graciously offered its Bahá'í Center as the venue and provided all the meals for the participants.

The central objective of the seminar was to renew the spirit of teaching within the clusters served by the participants and to bring about a deeper understanding of the factors involved in planning and implementing a collective teaching project. The program included the study of quotations on teaching, an analysis of the cluster growth profiles of the targeted clusters, consultation on how to systematically plan and conduct collective teaching projects, practice of "Anna's presentation," and the design of a teaching project. All of the sessions were practical and interactive and helped prepare the participants for two days of intensive, direct teaching,

after which a final review session was held. The teaching project included visits to known seekers but mainly focused on reaching new neighborhoods. In two days the project recorded 58 enrollments in the three Dallas clusters: 35 adults and 23 junior youth and children.

It is anticipated that another 19 clusters will be directly affected by the training because each participant left with an action plan to implement a collective teaching project in a selected cluster for two weeks sometime between mid-April and mid-May. Gradually some of these believers will become experienced resource persons in their own right and will be able to replicate this orientation program in their own areas. The feedback from the participants was uniformly positive. One friend thanked the organizers for “the life-altering experience” and another participant expressed the feeling that “as we teach individuals, families enter, neighborhoods change, and our work together as co-workers lasts for all eternity.”

### ***Results from Recent Expansion and Consolidation Efforts around the Globe***

- **Sarawak.** The visit of resource people from Indonesia and West Malaysia has had a profound impact on the teaching work in this Southeast Asian community. In addition, local believers have also been deployed as resource persons to selected areas. Within a very brief period of time, clusters throughout Sarawak have begun to experience accelerated expansion—more than 120 enrollments in about a month. This compares to 29 declarations during the entire first half of the past year. With growing numbers of trained active believers carrying out core activities, the community is now well on its way to systematically attaining the expectation of 500 new believers between its December 2007 institutional gathering and Ridván 2008.
- **Andaman and Nicobar Islands.** During the first cycle of the intensive program of growth in the **Port Blair** cluster, 35 believers were divided into seven teaching teams after first reviewing Book 6. Within the first three days of the expansion phase, they achieved 10 enrollments and began implementing their plans to involve these new friends in the institute process. During the previous year, there were only 12 declarations for the entire territory.
- **Australia.** In the **Central and South East Sydney** cluster, the believers visited homes in a receptive area to invite interested people to information evenings, which included a devotional meeting conducted at a rented hall in that same neighborhood. At the end of the program, attendees were divided into small groups and accompanied by individual Bahá'í teachers who facilitated more intimate discussion about the Faith. The teachers presented a series of themes from Book 6, using a flip chart, answered questions, and otherwise engaged the seekers in spiritual conversation. This more direct approach created a major breakthrough in the teaching work for that cluster. Within two weeks, there were 8 declarations. In **Brisbane**, the teaching efforts of 90 friends attracted some 80 seekers to a total of 15 musical firesides during its recent expansion phase. The use of the arts in offering “Anna’s presentation” at the firesides proved highly effective as evidenced by the unprecedented declaration of 16 people in two weeks and 40 seekers and new believers enrolling to study Book 1.
- **Cambodia.** This country is well on its way to raising an intensive program of growth in all its clusters. Resource persons from advanced clusters are being systematically recruited, trained, and dispatched to less advanced clusters where they are assisted by visiting teaching teams from the “A” clusters to establish a core group of new believers and seekers in their new community. These individuals are then accompanied by the homefront pioneer

and travel-teaching teams to carry out the practices of the institute courses, thereby establishing the core activities on a firm basis in the less developed clusters. This approach is effectively moving the less advanced clusters forward at a steady pace.

- **Croatia.** A three-day mini-teaching project was carried out in **Zagreb**, a “B” cluster with only 67 believers. Activities during the weekend included 11 home visits and the sharing of prayers, deepening themes, and “Anna’s presentation” with seekers. This effort resulted in four enrollments in three days and the attraction of a number of others to the Faith, whereas over the previous two years the community had seen only two declarations.
- **Trinidad and Tobago.** The friends in the **North East** cluster have begun to come together to study “Anna’s presentation” and then go out teaching. This approach recently resulted in 26 new believers, including 8 children and junior youth. Of these, most were quickly integrated into core activities, especially the children and youth. These developments have “generated a fresh excitement within the cluster.”

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